

# An American in Sophiatown

Directed by Lloyd Ross

Produced by Michael A. Rogosin

Many film documentaries record the emergence of a work or the evolution of a filmmaker, but for surprise and gripping political interest few can equal or resemble "An American in Sophiatown."



Interspersed with clips from the original film "Come Back Africa", the late Lionel Rogosin, aided by those who participated in the making of the film, tells the story of how he penetrated the sealed township of Sophiatown, Johannesburg during the iron rule of the apartheid regime. In what sometimes develops like a political thriller, he tells how he fooled the regime into believing he was shooting a harmless travelogue only to emerge with one of the most damning portrayals of lives lived under pressure of a police state.  
— Lewis Nkosi.



[www.lionelrogosin.com](http://www.lionelrogosin.com)



DIRECTED AND EDITED BY EARLE LLOYD ROSS. CONCEIVED/PRODUCED BY MICHAEL A. ROGOSIN  
CO-PRODUCED BY DANIEL ROGOSIN, DAVID ANDRIOLE, MICHAEL GAIN, PRODUCED IN SOUTH AFRICA BY REEDMAN VALLEY. MUSIC BY JEFF GARDNER  
FEATURING: ISABEL BALSERO, MYRTLE BERMAN, EMIL KNEBEL, NTONGELA MASILELA, LORENZA MAZZETTI, JONAS MEXAS, LEWIS NKOSI, ELINOR HART ROGOSIN AND LIONEL ROGOSIN.  
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# An American in Sophiatown

An American in Sophiatown puts *Come Back Africa* into the context of the time it was made (1957-1958) – recreating the sense of danger, the intrigues which were necessary to make the film under the nose of the apartheid regime. We come to learn of Rogosin's deep political motivations for choosing this subject of apartheid and to better understand themes involved in *Come Back Africa*. Through interviews with Rogosin and archival material, the film recreates the making of the film and the world it reflected.

Fifty years after the film was made, acclaimed South African writer Lewis Nkosis takes us back to the places where the script was written and shot. In a poignant moment of emotion Nkosis revisits Sophiatown, walking back into his memory to a place which no longer exists as it was and to the apartment where he helped write the script. This emotional moment creates the universal feeling of time passing and of places and worlds that disappear.

Nkosis, one of the South African important writers who also played a role in *Come Back Africa*, remembers the vibrant culture now known as the 'Sophiatown Renaissance' that developed in spite of the apartheid regime. We learn of this unique culture and of the places called Sheebens which were the only places where 'colored' and black artists, writers, musicians and the common man could meet.

Interviews with the last remaining participants shed insight into the difficulties and realities of making the film and include Elinor Rogosin, wife of the director, Emil Knebel the cameraman, and Myrtle Berman (an anti-apartheid activist who accepted to play the racist bourgeois employer in the film). Professors of African cinema and culture Isabel Balseiro and Nogela Massilela sketch the historical perspective that formed the backdrop to the film: the plight of a black peasant coming to the city to find work embodying the plight of dis-

-placement and loss of identity. The film also explains how Rogosin brought Myriam Makeba out of South Africa to the Venice film festival, bribing the authorities, thus supporting and enabling her career outside of Africa.

This documentary film has been screened with acclaim at the Bologna Film festival, Dallas film festival and at the Barbican in England.

*An American in Sophiatown* was conceived and produced by Michael Rogosin who also researched and conducted the interviews used during the film with the exception of the interviews of his father Lionel Rogosin, which were conducted by Russian filmmaker Marina Golodovskaya. Michael Rogosin met prize winning South African film director Lloyd Ross (best documentary Durban Film Festival 2009) in 2006 when filming the return of Lewis Nkosis to Sophiatown and they collaborated together to make the film.



Title: *An American in Sophiatown*.  
Length: 55'.  
Format: HDV.  
Color and B&W: interviews/ archival footage/  
documents/ photos.  
Music: South Africa, solo piano Jeff Gardner  
pianist/composer  
Type of work: documentary  
Intended audience: Independent film/ apartheid  
history/ African music and dance/ ethnology /  
Township and Sophiatown Renaissance history



Filming *An American in Sophiatown*, with, from left to right: Lewis Nkosis, Michael Cain, Michael Rogosin, Andrea Meneghelli, and the Italian team.